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Businesses need disaster plan

By Ed Waters Jr.

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FREDERICK — Are you prepared for a disaster, either personally or for your business?

That was the theme of a business outlook seminar held Friday morning by the Frederick County Chamber of Commerce.

Although much of the discussion focused on the value of telecommuting and transportation, the key was how to keep businesses, and personal communications, going during a crisis.

Elham Shirazi, an expert in planning for telecommuting, said while the practice is growing, a company needs to look at many factors.

"Is the employee the right type of person to work at home? Is the supervisor the right person for that job, and do you have the right technology to make it work?" Ms. Schirazi said.

"The picture of the mom with the baby on her lap working on a computer from home is not the right picture" of telecommuting, she said.

People use electronic communications more in the office, and more than 40 million — about 25 percent of the work force — used e-communications in 2005 for business, she said.

"Offering telecommuting, even if only one or two days a week, can help with recruitment and retention and cuts down on absenteeism," Ms. Shirazi said, because even if someone is too sick to come into the office, they may still be able to work at home.

"Power may be out at your workplace, but not at your home," she said.

Jack Markey, assistant chief of the Frederick County Fire and Rescue Services and director of emergency services, coordinates various entities when a crisis hits.

"The Frederick County road network is known for its difficulty to get around, even when there is no crisis," Mr. Markey said. He recommended employers look at alternate transportation services, such as the local TransIt buses and rental car programs, and ways for both employee and company vehicles to save gas.

"I have everything I need in my laptop, even if my building is inhabitable. Some people can't do that, but it is important to plan ahead and know what to do in the case of a crisis, whether a power outage or storm or terrorism," Mr. Markey said. "Unfortunately, businesses too often put such plans on a 'to do later' list. It is something that needs to be done now."

Waiting until something happens and then asking, "What do I do now? Who do I contact?" is not the answer, he said. "About 60 percent of businesses that suffer from disasters don't reopen." Planning ahead can help avoid that.

Focusing on fluctuating gasoline prices, Jamal Qureshi of PFC Energy explained that while there is plenty of crude oil right now, the problem is refining that crude oil. He also noted that the price of crude oil accounts for 47 percent of the cost of gas at the pump. Taxes account for another 27 percent; refining, 15 percent; and marketing and distribution, 14 percent.

"The local gas station operator is working on a very low margin," he said.

After gas "crises" in the 1970s



Staff photo by Ed Waters Jr.

The Frederick County Chamber of Commerce hosted several speakers Friday on energy and preparing for a disaster. From left are Justin Schor, UrbanTrans Consultants; Elham Shirazi, e-Planning; Jamal Qureshi, PFCC Energy; Jack Markey, Frederick County Emergency Services; and Fleta Knight, Army Community Services.

and 1980s, many companies shut down refineries, but there are other factors affecting the energy problem.

"In the Middle East, gas may be 5 cents a gallon, but insurgents are always blowing up pipelines," he said

"One in 10 of every barrel of oil is burned in a car in the U.S., and that does not count jet fuel and other products," Mr. Qureshi said. "We use 20 million barrels a day in the U.S., but the refinery capacity here is only 16 million."

One of the major obstacles to moving ahead with real energy programs is the automakers, he said. "It sounds terrible to say, but the only way we may get a real program is if Detroit dies. It

seems it may die on its own, the way things are going."

Although the increased popularity of sport utility vehicles and cars with low fuel mileage has added to the problem, affordable housing is also a culprit. People trying to find a house they can afford move farther away from their workplace because of high living costs, adding to fuel use and traffic congestion. That is where telecommuting can help, though it is not always possible for every business.

"The world right now has plenty of crude oil, but there is potentially a shortage coming — not in five years, but possibly after that, there could be a problem," Mr. Qureshi said.